

Review of: Vidler, Laura. *Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama: Reviving and Revising the Comedia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 204 pp. *Bulletin of the Comediantes* (2016): 174-77.

In recent years, there has been quite a bit of enthusiasm and interest among scholars of early modern English and Spanish drama to embrace the performative aspects of seventeenth-century plays. Laura L. Vidler's monograph, *Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama: Reviving and Revising the Comedia*, is a prominent example of recent trends in *comedia* studies to examine and analyze Golden Age theatrical works through the lens of performance studies. As Vidler indicates, portions of some of the chapters have been published previously as articles, but further developed here.

Chapter One analyzes the debates concerning critical theory and theater generally and performance studies specifically, and insists on the necessity of interdisciplinarity to cogently examine the relationship between spectacle and spectator. Vidler notes that since the 1950s, *comedia* scholars have begun to compile a vast amount of historical and archival material (ledgers, bills of sale, contracts, notes and letters, repair orders, etc.) that has helped develop a behind-the-scenes understanding of the stage practices of theatrical production.

Such archival research then provided a strong impetus to develop analyses that go beyond reliance on the written play text. Indeed, Vidler examines several modern critical approaches to the *comedia* and indicates that the combined subjective *and* objective interpretations offered today by performance theory seem to be the most promising for examining Golden Age theater. Throughout the chapters, she bases her analyses on Pierre Bourdieu's notion *habitus* ("structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures") as outlined in his *The Logic of Practice*. Vidler then explains that a Golden Age play is both an individual and collective practice —like *habitus*—that develops through performance: "The relationship between the current circumstances that motivate the practice, and the historical milieu in which that *habitus* developed is realized, in Bourdieu's own words, through its performance" (21). As a result, Vidler states:

It is not enough, therefore, simply to deduce individual structures through historical, objectivist means, nor to analyze them solely through subjectivist, phenomenological interpretation. [...] a *habitus* of the corral stage may be articulated through an analysis of a performance of this interrelationship. *Habitus* is neither historical, nor ahistorical. It is a way of approaching the world that is both culturally determined and culturally determining (21).

For Vidler, *habitus* allows *comedia* scholars to take into account not only the structure of culture, but also the human capacity to later manipulate those structures for both individual and social expression (20). The application of *habitus* forms the basis for her individual interpretations in the subsequent chapters:

Chapter Two focuses on space and spatiality of the Golden Age stage. Vidler first concentrates on how the go-between figure of Fabia in *El caballero de Olmedo* was appropriated from the visual iconography from the woodcut prints in the early editions of the *La Celestina* (particularly the 1499 Burgos edition). While several critics already have noted the textual similarities between the two characters, Vidler instead concentrates on how the visual representation of Celestina in the woodcuts were so well known during the time that they can "approximate a visual staging of Fabia" (28). In the second half of this chapter, Vidler analyzes the various uses of the "reja" in Golden Age plays as a minimalist stage prop: a prison cell, a window grate, an instrument that divides the stage both vertically and horizontally, etc. This portion of the chapter is a catalogue of the different uses of the "reja" as stock set pieces in variety of plays including *El caballero de Olmedo* and *La vida es sueño* which makes clear that "the reja is a

scenic element structurally structured, not only the physical scenic space, but also scenic spatiality. The versatility of the *corral reja* is an excellent example of the dislocation of the Spanish baroque spatial habitus, a structured and structured structure that communicates dramatic meaning..." (53-4).

In Chapter Three, the author examines the gestures and movements of the human body on stage through a comparison of period dance steps to movement and swordplay of certain protagonists in Lope's *Fuenteovejuna*. In the absence of stage directions from printed manuscripts, Vidler maintains that Lope, more so than many other dramatists of the period, focuses more on the body movement of his protagonists such that the playwright "juxtaposes the stance and foot position of the nobles and peasants" (68). The body posture of characters in the play, for Vidler, recall models such as Velázquez in his self-portrait in *Las Meninas* or proper stance described in Juan de Esquivel Navarro's *Discursos sobre el arte del danzado* and Luis Pacheco de Narváez's *Libro de la grandezas de la espada*.

Chapter Four concentrates on inanimate objects such as clothing which often stand apart from the actors who employ them. Vidler shows how actors manipulate stage props deliberately to the extent that inanimate objects ultimately develop meaning and even symbolic value. More specifically, Vidler shows how ribbons, letters, capes, and swords in *El caballero de Olmedo* becomes "examples of how everyday objects can be dislocated on the stage for dramatic function" (81).

The role and depiction of women protagonists are the focus of Chapter Five where the author examines the appropriation and manipulation of stage weapons by Solmira in Lope's *El último godo* and Antona in Tirso de Molina's *Antona García*. As Vidler notes, instead of seeing women dressed as men as is often the case in many other plays, in these two theatrical works there is never any indication that they are anything other than strong female protagonists—which is relatively novel: "These two women distinguish themselves from other *comedia* protagonists both through their appropriation and manipulation of combative weapons, and by problematizing notions of gender and subjectivity in early modern Spanish theatrical performance" (108).

Chapter Six takes up general questions of play translation, modern-day performance of early modern Spanish works in English, and play adaptation for a contemporary audience. One of Vidler's goals is to help gloss the various approaches to modern-day performance of seventeenth-century texts and provide a platform for discussion by current directors such as Laurence Boswell and Hugo Medrano about their own views on adaptation and translation.

Vidler describes her final chapter as "staging reconstruction in a post-theory environment" (7) and examines recent trends in critical theory—digital humanities, algorithmic criticism, cognitive approaches to literature, animal theory, and artificial intelligence—before questioning their validity because they rely too heavily on their various models of empiricism (i.e., attempts at purely objective analyses). She spends a good deal of time on cognitive studies, but not everyone will agree with her critique: "(...) while purportedly objective approaches have certainly resulted in new interpretations of previously analyzed texts, they have clearly not resulted in the single correct answer to a math problem" (147). Such statements seem to posit that cognitive studies in all its various forms only insist on one answer.

Instead, Vidler advocates for performance theory as a better method of inquiry because of its objective *and* subjective focus provides multiple answers and "pushes the boundaries of what we can and cannot know" (7). For the author, the combination of interpretive and non-interpretive methods at the heart of performance theory is the most promising: "Because performance theory actively engages and intertwines both objective and subjective modes of interpretation, I believe it can be the locus of the

next breakthroughs in interpretive studies. Performance theorists who ignore Bourdieu and others attempting to resolve this crisis of interpretation do so at their own peril" (150). Surely, *comedia* scholars will welcome Vidler's insights into new heterogeneous methods for examining Golden Age theater, but some will no doubt take issue with her privileging performance theory over other critical approaches. Moreover, by discounting the benefits of purely subjective or objective approaches while incorporating both into performance theory, Vidler runs the risk of undermining her own project.

Much of Vidler's application relies on two canonical plays, Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* and *El caballero de Olmedo*, and readers surely will welcome new explorations of these important works as well as shorter examinations of Lope's *El ultimo godo* and Tirso's *Antona García*. Vidler also provides peripheral examples from several other well-known works: Calderón's *El médico de su honra*, *La dama duende*, and *La vida es sueño*, Lope's *El castigo sin venganza* and *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, and Cervantes' *El retablo de las maravillas* to name the most prominent.

At many points, Vidler offers non-literary examples taken from contemporary culture and society that are often highly enlightening and engaging, but sometimes a little unrelated: cooking, the evolution of Modern Hebrew, the state of public education and the influence of politics on accountability, the finances of contemporary Broadway theatrical productions, recent politicians (Sarah Palin, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush), the orca scandal at Sea World, and the O.J. Simpson trial, to list the most noticeable.

Overall, Laura L. Vidler's *Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama* is a fine contribution to performance studies generally and Spanish Golden Age drama specifically. Her close engagement with critical theory and her willingness to look beyond the text alone provides some interesting new insights into plays, playwriting, and theatrical practices of the Golden Age.